A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture
Native South American Myths and Rituals

Texas Linguistics Series

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University of Texas Press, Austin
If, in literature, the work of art as such is the form of expression of an idea, it is all the more so in folklore.

—Vladimir Propp (1976:281)

The discourse-centered approach to culture is founded on a single proposition: that culture is localized in concrete, publicly accessible signs, the most important of which are actually occurring instances of discourse. While seemingly innocuous, that proposition opens up alternatives to the view of culture as an abstract system of meaning through which reality is apprehended and social order established. In the latter view (which came into prominence in the 1960s but has its roots in the linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure and the sociological functionalism of Emile Durkheim), culture is assumed to be shared, even though it is not localized in concrete signs, and to exhibit continuity over time. In the approach reflected here, and in other discourse-centered work, the extent of sharing and continuity is opened to empirical investigation through the comparison of actual instances of discourse usage.

To view culture from the vantage point of socially circulating discourse is, simultaneously, to gain a new perspective on those objects that have so often fascinated anthropologists—myths and rituals. In the case of myths, a dominant paradigm of the 1970s was structuralism, associated with the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and especially with his four-volume series (Les Mythologiques). Lévi-Strauss approached myths as narratives or stories in whose referential content one could glimpse the structuring logic of binary oppositions, such as the vertical space opposition (up: down or high: low) reflected in the “bird-nester” myths of central Brazilian Indians. A boy out searching for fledgling birds with one of his relatives climbs a tree or the side of a cliff, but is abandoned there by his male relative and is unable to descend until rescued by a jaguar. The vertical opposition intersects with the human: animal or culture: nature opposition in the guise of the (human, cultured) relatives versus the (animal, natural) jaguar.
From a discourse-centered point of view, however, the challenge is to see the myth not as a mental object, but rather as concrete, unfolding discourse. We do not lose sight of the boy in the bird nest, but, momentarily at least, we situate him inside the words carried along by sounds and then written down on paper and recopied and recirculated. How to see that the boy exists not in the world of the senses in a direct way, but rather in publicly accessible discourse, which in turn inhabits the sensible world; how to relocate him, giving him a place within the discursive community of which he is a part, rather than, or in addition to, the mythical village of which he seems to be a part; how to question his immorality or perdurance as a cultural symbol not on myth-internal grounds but on the grounds that, when the myth is told again, it is told differently—those are the challenges of an approach to culture from the perspective of discourse.

It is true that natives may essentialize myths by giving them names, although, as often as not, this is done by the ethnographer rather than by the native (as in "The Origin of Fire," "The Jaguar's Wife," or "The Monkey's Son-in-Law" from Lévi-Strauss's The Raw and the Cooked). The name leads to the myth the appearance of a thing, an object that transcends the instance of discourse in which it is momentarily trapped. The boy threatens to break out of his confinement in spoken or printed words and to assume an independent life in the mind, whether in the minds of the central Brazilian Indians or in those of the readers. But naming is itself a discourse practice, in this case, a metadiscursive practice, the name being about the discourse segment in question (as in "this is a story about . . .")—and metadiscursive practices, of which naming is one, require ethnographic investigation as part of the social circulation or life of discourse more generally. They provide no evidence for or against the existence of a Platonic form behind the shadowy occurrence of discourse. While there are two levels—the metadiscursive naming and the discourse instance, that is, the myth telling—and while one level seems to freeze the other, fixing it for all time, it remains for empirical investigation to determine precisely in what measure it does so. What are the relationships between one telling and another? Is there a myth that is told and retold or is each telling unique? To be sure, if we are dealing with culture that has been passed on across generations, the given instance is a copy of some earlier instance of discourse, but in what ways is it similar and in what ways different?

We have not yet brought into conceptual focus the boy in the nest, although we have established that he leads a double existence, a dual life. On the one hand, he wanders in a mythical world where jaguars speak, hunt with bow and arrow, and monopolize fire (leaving humans to warm their
meat by setting it out on rocks in the sun); on the other hand, he inhabits the sensible medium of speech or print, circulates within a discourse community in ways that remain to be ethnographically described, and changes and evolves over time, as the discourse in which he is embedded alters in the course of numerous replications and recontextualizations. But his life within the mythic world has not been linked to his life inside the moment of discourse; it is as if the two were unconnected, parallel lives—the discourse merely an indifferent vehicle for this other worldly object.

In fact, however, the other world is built up out of discourse itself, embedded in a social context; his life unfolds as part of a momentary, historically specific instance of speech, analyzable in terms of linguistically identifiable segments—phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, phrases, and clauses—as well as in terms of the parallel relationships between the constituents over the linear time of the text (cf. Hymes 1981), and, finally, in the case of spoken forms, in terms of pause, intonation, and voice quality (cf. Sherzer 1982; Tedlock 1983; Woodbury 1985). The discourse, as a concretely occurring sign vehicle, mediates the boy’s dual life, for it is here that he is identified with microsegments of the longer discourse, segments that are decodable as lexemes or as anaphoric pronouns and that enter into syntactic relationships with other microsegments decodable as nouns and verbs or their substitutes; these relationships, spread out over the seconds or minutes of the myth narration or reading, produce his life. The transformations of structural analysis, which Lévi-Strauss identifies with the human mind, confronting sensuous, concrete experience, are recast from this angle as structures operating at the level of momentaneously unfolding discourse.

Lévi-Strauss’s work—whose greatness is by no means diminished by its resituation from the point of view of contemporary discourse research—carefully elaborates, in almost painterly fashion, the social and natural world confronted by the mind in the course of myth’s production—down to the minutiae of central Brazilian flora and fauna and their habits. The shift in emphasis in the 1980s, however, questions whether it is the mind or discourse that confronts the sensuous world—or, alternatively, if it is the mind, then whether the mind should be equated with the brain or with the reservoir of discourse for which the community functions as a holding environment. There is an important difference: the mind as brain confronts experience from a purely intellectual standpoint; the mind as discourse, alternatively, includes the intellect, but it also includes more. If spoken or printed discourse is a vehicle for thought, it is also a tool for persuasion and manipulation, for commanding and coordinating actions, for kindling and expressing emotions, and for maintaining social relations. Rather than subvert the aims of structuralism, discourse research recontextualizes them, opening up for investigation the multiplicity of meanings that myths as utterances encode. Chapters 2–4 take up this problematic for Brazilian Indian myths, with special reference to the south Brazilian Shoklen. Chapters 5–7 extend the discussion from mythic discourse as ritualized to ritualized speech more generally.

In some respects, the bird-nester poses an inverse problem to the mudyi tree, the dominant symbol of Nkhang’a—the girl’s puberty ritual of the Ndembu studied by Victor Turner (1967). Whereas the boy analyzed by Lévi-Strauss resides in discourse, the mudyi of Nkhang’a resides in the empirical world, a well-wooded plateau whose streams flow into the Zambezi River; and whereas the boy threatened to break out of his confinement in concrete speech or print, taking on an independent life in the mind, there can be no question about the concreteness and localization of the mudyi or milk tree (Diplorrhyncus condylolarpon). Its phenomenal reality is beyond doubt, from its visual to its tactile properties, including the milky substance extruded by its bark upon laceration. The sheer physicality of the milk tree, and of the ritual surrounding it, overwhelms the imaginary and intangible life of the bird-nester as a mental object.

However, the milk tree for the Ndembu is more than a physical object; it is a symbol possessing ideological meanings—human breast milk, the mother-child bond, and matriliney as the principle of Ndembu unity—and also contextual meanings, pertaining to social differentiations of women from men, daughter from mother, and own matriline from other matrilies. In his justly celebrated analysis, Turner (1967:20) distinguishes the types of data from which these meanings are inferred: “(1) external form and observable characteristics; (2) interpretations offered by specialists and by laymen; (3) significant contexts largely worked out by the anthropologist.” The methodology permits the anthropologist access to the relationship between Ndembu and physical things, in a manner analogous to, albeit distinct from, the access Lévi-Strauss achieved through myths to the central Brazilian Indian mind as it confronted the physical and social world. The careful attention to naturalistic detail is important here: the milk tree exudes a milky sap, visually reminiscent of breast milk, which is associationally linked to the mother-child bond, which is in turn linked to the principle of matriliney. Informant testimony confirms that this path of associations is at work.

The physical object—the milk tree—like the bird-nester, leads a dual life: on the one side, it lives in the physical world accessible to the senses, presenting itself phenomenally through its visual, tactile, and perhaps also olfactory, gustatory, and even auditory properties (the rustle of its leaves,
of chants and songs was left by most social anthropologists to ethnomusicologists and later linguistic anthropologists, whose results were not until recently (Feld 1982; Seeger 1986, 1987) reinserted. Culture continued to be ghostlike, suffusing the world with meanings but unanchored in an objectively circulating discourse.

It is curious that discourse was for so many of the social anthropologists—ignoring, for the moment, Malinowski and the recent work by Maurice Bloch and others—effectively invisible. It was not just a distrust for what natives had to tell one, a distrust that may be well-founded, as Lévi-Strauss’s (1967) distinction between “conscious and unconscious models” suggests, and Turner’s own work confirms. To comment upon discourse is also to produce discourse—metadiscourse, which is itself worthy of ethnographic description. What individuals say about what they say is not necessarily identical to what they in fact say. The dialectical tension between discourse and metadiscourse may well be central to the processes of culture and is, in any case, in need of empirical investigation, but the question of discourse invisibility goes deeper.

One issue here is ideological: the material world is regarded as fundamental or real, and the canonical form of the material is the visible—the white latex of the milk tree. Invisibility has to do in this sense with nonvisibility, with the aural quality of discourse as part of social process in small-scale societies, with muddy not as the printed word on the page, but rather as the sounds uttered in gesturing toward a specific tree. In societies like Ndembu, where evidence from overt behavior—the spatial arrangements of villages, subsistence habits such as hunting or herding, and the conduct of ritual involving visual displays—was noteworthy (or, in any case, where anthropologists wished to see it as noteworthy), the status of discourse could readily be downgraded to epiphenomenal. Under such an ideology, real cultural difference is phenomenal—even though the phenomena are suffused with ghostlike meanings—and to be phenomenal is to be visible. The formal speech styles discussed in chapters 5–7 present an intermediate case in this regard: while still invisible in this sense, they achieve greater objecthood by virtue of their saliency for both anthropologist and native.

If one uses one’s own language to communicate with natives (or, if not, then once a foreign language is thoroughly mastered), discourse becomes invisible in another sense: it becomes transparent to the world. It carries meanings that are about the world, which, however, also presents itself to us visually, as shapes, outlines, colors, textures. Spoken words are in this sense for anthropology a window to the invisible visible world, allowing us to see what the native sees—to see not just a tree with leaves and bark and
A familiar prank trades on the distinction: encouraged by natives to reproduce some utterance, an obscenity, for example, without being told its meaning, the anthropologist does so—whereupon they all burst out laughing. The anthropologist concludes that they know something he or she does not know: the meaning. Structuralism concurs, but it proposes in addition that the meaning can be studied independently of the instances, that there are methods that can get us to language without going through discourse. Moreover, language must be a capacity we have that is prior to and independent of discourse.

This is an argument that can be extended from discourse to any instance of behavior—a ritual behavior or mother-in-law avoidance, for instance—whose significance is at the outset unfathomable. It can be extended even to the Ndembu milk tree. There appears to be an independent realm of meaning prior to discourse and prior to our encounters with physical experience more generally, of which discourse as physical object is only one example. And if that is true, is it not also the case that the meanings are shared within a community—by the individuals who are laughing around the anthropologist, for instance? An argument of this sort underlies linguistic structuralism and also the approach to culture as shared meanings. But the argument is vulnerable to the issue of publicness on the methodological front—how one studies language as an experience-prior system of meaning, as I will argue subsequently—and also in terms of its more sweeping claim for sharedness.

The isolated instance of discourse turns out to be an illusion, created by the observational stance of the anthropologist as outsider, for example, or by the reader reflecting upon the isolated written line. Within a discursive community, an instance of discourse arises only against the backdrop of a continuing history of such instances, in relationship to which it can be situated. The actual situating is done subjectively, but it is based upon a vast range of historical experience with other instances, which are also part of the public circulation of discourse in the ongoing life of a community. “The boy got up to the nest” is meaningless in itself as a physical object; but it is part of a reservoir of publicly accessible objects of a similar type, with which it can be compared, and comparison leads to recognition of similarities, differences, and contiguities. The constituent objects “b,” “o,” and “y” are familiar, traditional objects, as is the combination “boy.” These are not novelties, presented here for the first time, but shapes that members of this discourse community have seen innumerable times. It is not that the meanings are necessarily shared, but that the collection of instances from which meanings are culled is publicly accessible. The collection forms the basis for recognizing interconnections, but the interconnec-
tions that are recognized may vary from person to person, depending in part on the degree and kind of access they have had to the overall community history. Recent discourse studies seem to be suggesting, therefore, that shared meaning is a product of public accessibility rather than (or in addition to being) a necessary precondition for it.

Another way of putting this is that linguistic structurality creates the appearance of abstract meanings by ignoring time. Saussure was explicit in formulating his view of language as a synchronic system. Any given discourse entities, such as “x” and “y” in figure 1a, appear as abstract types, which enter into two kinds of relationships: syntagmatic and paradigmatic. But from the point of view of a community discourse history, those types are actually built up from the recognition of similarities across historical time, as in figure 1b. When physical marks on the page are observed, or sounds heard, they have to be related to other ones that have come before them in order for there to be public accessibility in the first place, on the basis of which sharing becomes possible. The synchronic system is the result of an illusion, produced, so to speak, from looking down on a three-dimensional array; the historically unfolding interconnections seem to be present all at once.

But if this is an illusion, it is an illusion that corresponds to the subjective point of view on discourse. Much as myth essences are created by the metadiscursive practice of naming (“this is the story about . . .”), so also are linguistic types produced by metadiscursive acts (“this is a word that means . . .”). The Saussurean scheme may be seen from this perspective as reflecting specifically, in the first place, a subjective metadiscursive reflectionist point of view, which, in the second place, asks questions about decontextualized (rather than contextualized) meanings: “What is the meaning of . . .?” “Is the following grammatical . . .?” “Do these two words mean the same thing . . .?” It is a scheme that corresponds to what can be, for members of the community, a subjective reality. It would be a mistake to assume, however, that the meanings resulting from this metadiscursive reflection must be shared within a community. The matter calls for empirical investigation. An alternative proposition might run as follows: all things being equal, two speakers will produce similar metadiscursive reflections if and insofar as they have had equal access to publicly occurring discourse. If two speakers share the same kinds of experiences with what is objectively describable as the same discourse, they will tend to produce, in their reflections on decontextualized meanings, the same kinds of metadiscursive statements. The proposition makes the meanings a function of accessibility, rather than the other way around.

Fig. 1a. Synchronic model of structure

Fig. 1b. Discourse-centered model of cultural whole

There is in all this, however, a complicating factor: the metadiscursive reflections can themselves be articulated and thereby made to circulate publicly. A dictionary is a collection of metadiscursive statements that is also canonical. It says in effect: “this is how words are to be used as well as how they have been used.” Grammars are also circulating metadiscursive formulations, which can be simultaneously descriptive and normative, as I will argue subsequently. But there are many other kinds of metadiscourse, some of them overt, such as publicly expressed evaluative judgments about a myth telling or song performance, and others subtle, such as poetic devices designed to call attention to the instance of discourse in question—Jakobson’s (1960) poetic function. Interpretation—understood as
recognition of interconnections within the community discourse history—is thus subject to manipulation and politicization through metadiscourse. Two areas of metadiscursive politicization that are of special interest to social anthropologists are authority, which rests on the metadiscursive understanding of commands as linguistic devices (discussed in chapter 3), and continuity (discussed in chapter 4), which rests upon the metadiscursive assertion that a given instance of discourse is continuous with previous ones.

It would be foolhardy to jettison the Saussurean framework from our understanding of culture. Recent discourse-oriented research suggests not that we dismantle language, but rather that we reposition it. A single self-contained Saussurean system that is both complete and consistent, and that is shared by a discourse community, is simply not a precondition for public accessibility; at best, it is an ideal outcome of accessibility, an outcome that is never actually obtained. At the same time, the products of metadiscursive reflection stand in a problematic, rather than transparent, relationship to the processes by which speakers actually produce and interpret utterances. We cannot imagine that speakers encode or decode utterances metadiscursively, that is, by means of internal metacommentary (saying to themselves: "a boy is a young male human being," "a nest is a bird's bed"). Metadiscursive acts seem to freeze or fix the historical configuration of instances, giving it the appearance of general law, while normatively stipulating what it should be. In fact, the similarities over time that form the basis for such metadiscursive acts are contingent and open-ended, susceptible to reconfiguration (a new pronouncement that is sufficiently similar to earlier ones to allow a recognition to take place, but different enough to cause a reconfiguration). A focus on discourse thus repositions language, making it appear to be the product of individual metadiscursive reflections whose comparability across speakers is opened for investigation. Primary emphasis, however, is placed on exploring community discourse histories and public circulation.

Another important shift has been in resituating Saussurean meanings or sense relations within a broader view of the different types of meaning that an instance may have. Sense is purely discourse-internal, that is, it has no connection to the perceptible world, as the source of images, outside of the sounds or visual shapes that are the sign vehicles of discourse. A given utterance—"but when the boy got up to the nest, he said that he could find only two eggs" (Lévi-Strauss 1966b:66)—has a meaning that seems to be disconnected from the immediate sensible environment in which it occurs. Sense relations make a contribution to that meaning. We have a feel for the distribution of the constituent sign vehicles with respect to others within the overall community discourse. For example, we know that "the boy got up to the nest" has a meaning similar to but different from "the boy got up to the lair," which is in turn similar to but different from "the girl got up to the lair," which is in turn similar to but different from "the girl got down to the lair," and so forth. Sense relations allow us to move between discourse instances; sense is the meaning a fragment of discourse has by virtue of its position within a whole collection of comparable fragments.

But sense is devoid of imaginal content, that is, images drawn from a physical world of real boys and nests and birds. Nevertheless, readers or listeners may associate the words on the page with images. They do not have to do so in order to have a sense of the utterance, but they may do so. Such images, however, are based on a distinct kind of meaningfulness: associations grounded in the physical contiguity in space and time between some fraction of discourse, describable as a word or phrase or clause, and some sense perception. The association may be idiosyncratic, drawn from nests or pictures of nests one has seen in conjunction with the word "nest." But imaginal associations are ultimately grounded in public or community agreements about the relations between sounds or graphic symbols and sense perceptions (A: "Hey, look at that black cat" [pointing to a white cat with black spots]; B: "You call that a black cat—and ain't what I call a black cat"), even if the agreements are always also subject to contestation and renegotiation. By virtue of such agreements and renegotiations, the community discourse history adapts itself to a sensible world.

Associational relations are called in the semiotic literature—which is off-putting for many because of its forbidding terminology—indexical relations, in the framework of C. S. Peirce as transmitted through Silverstein (1976b), Jakobson (1980), Singer (1984), and Mertz and Parmentier (1985). A fragment of discourse understandable in terms of Saussurean sense, the word "nest," for instance, may also enter into an indexical relation with the world, as in the metadiscursive practice of ostensive definition: "that [pointing to a nest] is a nest." Not all fragments that have sense also enter into indexical relations; correspondingly, not all indexical relations in discourse involve fragments that are also segmentable in terms of Saussurean sense: the melodic intonation contour of singing, as a form of discourse, while nonsensical, may nevertheless have associational indexical value.

Nor does indexation necessarily involve metadiscursive reflection, so that, correspondingly, not all associational processes are intellectual. Indeed, intellectual reflection may not be even the primary basis for apprehending associational meanings—as if every experience were monitored through internal commentary. In the case of contiguities, interconnection is something that can be felt as well as commented upon; just as an internal
comment can be made to circulate publicly as metadiscourse so, too, can an emotional awareness of interconnection be publicized in a gesture or facial expression. Felt interpretation of association is central to Steven Feld's (1982) path-breaking *Sound and Sentiment*, and also to Keith Basso's (1988) work on Western Apache place names, and to Ellen Basso's (1985) study of ritual and mythic transformations of grief among the central Brazilian Kalapalo. Though scholars have been reluctant to recognize it, the interpretive role of affect is well established in American folk representations—for example, in the familiar scene from *Casablanca* where Dooley Wilson's “As Time Goes By” calls up in Humphrey Bogart the recollection of Ingrid Bergman, who has actually, as the audience knows, reappeared and signaled her presence by this means.

The other nonsensical (in the Saussurean meaning of sense) associational linkage recognized by semioticians is the icon, whose basis is physical similarity. Similarity is the objective relationship that makes possible talk about a discourse entity (for example, a word such as *mudyi*), as an “it” across distinct instances, although, as in the case of the myth name that essentializes interconnections among discourse instances, the “it” here performs the metadiscursive magic of fixing the relations among instances, whose character may also be investigated objectively. But similarity operates in many different ways in discourse: for example, in repetition or parallelism—studied in chapters 2–4—as in chanting the word *mudyi*, which makes the similarities palpable.

In his treatise *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, J. G. Frazier (1911:52–53) formulated the two great “principles of thought on which magic is based,” which summarize the ethnographic underpinnings for similarity and contiguity as bases for forming interconnections—simultaneously giving anthropological precedent for semiotic usage. Frazer thought of the laws as capturing the magician’s unarticulated but nevertheless apparently embodied reasoning about cause and effect. Under the “Law of Similarity,” the magician reasoned that “like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause”—as in the case of the voodoo doll, whose physical resemblance to the person affected—however remote—is the basis for its efficacy. Under the “Law of Contagion,” the magician reasoned that “things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed”—as when locks of hair, nail clippings, or pieces of clothing are secured and acted upon in order to affect the person from whom they were secured.

Later scholars proposed that magicians were not reasoning incorrectly about physical causality but rather correctly reasoning about psychological reality—the political figure burned in effigy not to kill physically but rather to kill psychologically, that is, to express rage. However one interprets the principles, their ubiquity also reveals something else: the importance of similarity and contiguity as forms of interconnection—and not just their importance intellectually, but also, and perhaps more to the point, their importance emotionally. If much of the semiotic discourse literature has emphasized these relationships, it is for good reason: the relations are culturally significant. They are fundamental to the formation of interconnections among discourse instances and, indeed, to the broad experiential backdrop within which public signs become meaningful. The Saussurean insight has overwhelmed this older one, which semiotic work justly tries to resuscitate.

At the same time, the Saussurean view rightly exposes the inadequacy of associations for an understanding of culture or language. A minimal addition necessary to make the framework function is the relation of difference—that two things are not the same. Saussure's (1966 [1915]) phrase has been repeated so many times that it is by now almost trivial, but no less, for that reason, true: “in language there is only difference.” “Nest” is not the same as “bed,” nor for that matter as “west” or “rest.” But the addition of this relation changes everything. Whereas similarity and contiguity presuppose a sensible world prepackaged in discrete experiences that need to be pulled together—all of the spoken or printed instances of “nest”—difference presupposes a primal sameness that needs to be chopped up. Difference takes for granted sameness (that is, sufficient physical similarity or space-time proximity to require differentiating), whereas sameness (that is, the partial identities of similarity and contiguity) takes for granted difference. Whereas difference has as its point of departure the whole, similarity and contiguity have as theirs the part. The one tries to get from the whole to the unique instance; the other to work from the unique instance back toward the whole. The effort, in each case, is to read through from one to the other. From the perspective of public accessibility, as well as of recent discourse research, however, the two appear, on the one hand, resolutely irreconcilable but also, on the other, equally indispensable. They are discrete phases in the processes of culture: difference is part of the subjective (Saussurean metadiscursive) phase; similarity and contiguity parts of the objective (semiotic associational) phase.

The attention to discourse within culture resonates in the writings of early American cultural anthropologists, especially the work of Paul Radin. The title of Radin's 1949 monograph (*The Culture of the Winnebago: As Described by Themselves*) in light of its contents—a collection of myth
texts—suggests an orientation to discourse akin to the discourse-centered work of the 1980s. He discusses the methods by which the texts were collected: standard informant elicitation, the writing down of myths in the Winnebago syllabary by the Winnebago themselves, especially by one man, Sam Blowsnake, and (surprisingly, in 1908) use of the old Edison phonograph to record elicited tales, from which transcriptions were made. While it is true that these texts were collected out of their normal cultural contexts of narration and are not the same, therefore, as the transcribed tape recordings of in situ discourse that have emerged as central during the 1980s, and while it is true that Radin paid no attention to the role of naturally occurring discourse within ongoing social life, the spirit of his work is nevertheless surprisingly contemporary. This is especially so with respect to the sense of historicity and contingency that he and other Americanists shared, which manifested itself in a concern for emergent cultural forms, such as the peyote cult studied by the “method of reconstruction from internal evidence” (Radin 1965 [1933]: 183–252), that is, through the discourse of native accounts, or the ghost dance religion described by James Mooney (1892–1893).

This is no surprise, since the lineage of the discourse approach begins with Boas and the Americanists and leads through the ethnography of speaking founded by Dell Hymes, who in fact proposed a four-level framework for the analysis of communicative events, beginning with the fine-grained analysis of discourse and leading out to the role of communicative processes in the ongoing adaptation of the culture (Hymes 1974a). The differing and continuing contributions of various scholars to this line of research are now too numerous to mention, but include the work of Dennis Tedlock (1983), who, unlike Hymes, began to make use of tape recordings, which allowed him to focus on pause structure and other pragmatic features of utterances; Richard Bauman (1986), who emphasized the performance characteristics of discourse events; and Joel Sherzer (1983, 1987a), who not only wrote the first full-scale ethnography of speaking, based on his research among Kuna of Panama, but first formulated the discourse-centered approach to the problematics of language, culture, and society. The Americanist roots are also evident in Silverstein (1976b), who was directly influenced by Hymes, but added to discourse research the semiotic framework of Peirce, handed down through Roman Jakobson.

The concern with discourse developed gradually out of the research on North American Indians by the Boasians, for whom language, in the form of texts, was seen as a vehicle for reading back in time to an older culture of which the present was a vestige. While the cultures of the southwestern United States were still flourishing, many of the early Americanists, espe-

pecially Frank Speck and John R. Swanton, who were working on the Southeast, but also Boas himself in his Northwest Coast research, regarded the cultures they were studying as broken down, recoverable only through memories encoded in discourse. For them, discourse was a window to culture in a different sense; it was a portal through which one could peer back into time, seeing amid the debris of the present world customs that had vanished, a way of life that had been eclipsed by European culture. As one studies discourse today, discourse circulating in ongoing social life, it is all too easy to miss the important truth discovered by these early Americanists. Discourse is in fact the means by which the past is kept alive in the present, by means of which a culture is maintained. Without that splendid, nostalgia-filled image of the past, culture is reduced to little more than rote repetition. The truth that the Americanists found is that ancient times are alive in the present; they live in discourse.

Boas emphasized the collection of texts in the native language. Texts were critical empirical data for cultural anthropology, as one perusing publications of the Bureau of American Ethnology can attest. Because of their referential content, texts provided evidence about the past life of a culture, but they also gave to discourse a materiality or substantiality that was lacking in the ephemeral flow of the spoken form. Frozen visually in print, the Boasian text could become the object of empirical scrutiny and of the search for configuration or pattern. It is to the lasting credit of Dell Hymes (1981) that he made this breakthrough and began to focus attention on the primary vehicle of culture.

The success of discourse studies lies in their ability to challenge, through microanalysis, the transparency of discourse as a window to culture. The window is shown to have refracting properties—an internal configuration based upon parallelism that is attention-getting in its own right. Some of the fascination with culture appears upon closer inspection to be more properly a fascination with discourse. Moreover, the vast panorama of culture one imagines oneself to be glimpsing through discourse turns out to be at least partially an illusion induced by the medium—as if the medium had reflecting as well as refracting powers. Because of its ability to encode stories that only seem to be about the world, discourse can be a hall of mirrors, in relationship to which the apprehension of external reality appears at best problematic.

But at the same time these studies have generally failed to articulate with considerations of culture as a whole, despite the fact that culture provides the backdrop against which the specific instance of discourse becomes interpretable for the natives as well as for the anthropologist. Microresearch on discourse, as it has developed in the 1980s, is only beginning
to engage with broader interpretations or hypotheses about the whole of culture, which provide the ground of meaningfulness or interpretability for the instance. This new line of inquiry recasts anthropological investigation in the form of a dialectical interplay between the microscopic study of discourse—with time scales ranging from fractions of a second to minutes—and hypotheses about culture—with time scales ranging from decades to centuries.

While a view of culture, conceptualized as a collection or history of discourse instances, is only beginning to emerge from recent work, some differences with respect to other approaches are already apparent. There is a resemblance to the early diffusionist view, in which, however, culture was an amalgam of disparate elements with little internal unity or consistency, each constituent myth motif or cultural trait having a unique history and dispersion. While a collection of discourse instances has something of this caldronlike quality, it is also the case that individuals, from their own vantage point, may see the collection as a configuration—indeed, must do so in some measure if they are to regard the instance of discourse as interpretable. Insofar as the perspectives converge on a single configuration, there is something resembling culture in the sense of a shared system of abstract meanings, the asymptotic limit of which is the monolithic whole, passed down from generation to generation.

That limit was made the point of departure for Durkheim and the social anthropologists. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, indeed, viewed the social function of an element of culture as the contribution to the maintenance of the whole, where the whole was given reproductive primacy. From the point of view of discourse, it is possible that the collection of instances in some measure functions in this way, especially, for example, when there is a circulating metadiscursive ideology of continuity with the past, coupled with an ideology of sharing, making it appear as if the history of instances is a history of sameness and replication over time and space. Such discourse formations—discussed in chapters 6–8—are in fact to be found in central Brazil; but, while they may also be found elsewhere, they are by no means the universal type of culture. In adjacent areas in South America, north of the Amazon River, there is evidence for metadiscursive ideologies based not on similarity but on difference. For these cases, which are only elementary examples of how a metadiscursive ideology of difference may shape the understanding of discourse histories, the shared monolithic conception of culture is less adequate. In either type, however, it is important that, while a metadiscursive ideology may in some measure shape a discourse collection or history after its own image—so that, under an ideology of sharing and continuity, there may in fact be considerable sharing and con-

Continuity—there is bound to be slippage. No culture actually reaches the Radcliffe-Brownian limit.

What is the ontological status of that limit? Culture, as a collection or history of publicly accessible sign vehicles, the most important being instances of discourse, is—or so, anyway, I have been arguing—only half objective. Insofar as the instances are publicly accessible, that is, accessible to more than one individual, they have an existence as material things, however ephemeral. Speech can be tape-recorded and its sound characteristics studied and compared with those of other instances. The empirical similarities and differences can be demonstrated. These empirical characteristics of public discourse provide a check on the metadiscursive ideologies about the interconnections among instances, and they do so for both native and anthropologist. But the recognition of interconnectedness is simultaneously subjective, susceptible to influence from the metadiscursive ideology. The limit can be more readily approached from this side: it requires only sharing and continuity in the metadiscourse of continuity and sharing—all representing their discourse as the same as everyone else's and as continuous with the past—regardless of the realities. At the same time, however, if there is bound to be a slippage between metadiscourse and discourse—between the ideology of language use and its empirical characteristics—there is also likely to be a pressure on the two to align. A subjective feel for interconnectedness, based on continuity and sharing, coupled with a circulating metadiscourse of continuity and sharing, forces some measure of conformity as regards the objective discourse formation.

As the presupposition of continuity and sharing has undergone increasing challenge, especially in the 1980s, with a developing literature on resistance readings (Taussig 1980, 1987; Scott 1985), the opposite question comes into focus: what is the anti-Radcliffe-Brownian limit for a discourse formation? Is it coherent to speak of a discourse formation that exhibits no continuity and sharing? Here again the problem has both a subjective-objective dimension and a metadiscourse-discourse dimension. A metadiscourse of difference, as opposed to sameness and sharing, is, as just mentioned, found in the region north of the Amazon River in South America and is undoubtedly common in other parts of the world as well. The irony is that the ideology of difference in these cases is in fact shared. In empirical situations, such as those in the northwest Amazon described by Jean Jackson (1983) and Arthur Sorensen (1967), there appears to be considerable sharing beneath an ideology of differentiation. From a theoretical point of view, however, the minimum requirements are probably a byproduct of the notion of publicness, in terms of which culture is de-
fined. When discourse instances are publicly accessible, when the members of a community, however broadly defined, are immersed in some discursive history or collection of instances, the interconnections they construe are constrained by the fact of that objective similarity. This is the inverse case to that of the convergence of meaning limit. If convergence is limited by the objective entropy of discourse, divergence is limited by whatever objective sameness is the precondition for publicness, regardless of how disparate the interpretations. The interpretations—that is, the tracing of interconnections within the discourse history—must be fashioned out of the same discourse instances, and this produces some shared meanings. True difference is possible, from this point of view, only when the discourse formation fragments into isolated publics between which there is no communication.

Faced with the problematic of publicness and the limits of sharing, one appealing alternative is the isolated world of the Cartesian monad, where a presocial serenity of biological given and orderliness can seemingly be recovered from the chaotic multiple determinations of public life. This is nowhere more apparent than in Noam Chomsky’s approach to language, which has been central to American linguistics for more than twenty years. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, for whom the study of brain structures required a comparative cultural approach, thereby casting anthropological research as philosophical method, Chomsky’s (1984:6) proposal has been that “a great deal can be learned about UG [universal grammar] from the study of a single language.”

Recent discourse research does not rule out the possibility of universals, but it does call up for scrutiny the Cartesian methods that are used to get at them. During its earlier history, American structural linguistics—which, unlike Chomsky’s generative grammar or government and binding, stressed the comparison of diverse empirical languages—relied on two methods. There was, first of all, the method of elicitation of words, phrases, and sentences from informants. This typically involved, for native peoples, engaging in a new kind of discourse interaction, namely, taking fragments of their own language or discourse as topics of discussion, something the linguist had to train them to do. Second, it involved the analysis of texts, collected by the methods Radin (1949) has described in connection with his work on the Winnebago. Texts of the latter sort were also products of a new speech situation—teaching culture to an interested foreigner—but the line of linguistic research based on texts naturally gave rise to an interest in the discourse that circulates when the anthropologist is not there. What are myths like as actually told by natives to natives? What is discourse like when the anthropologist is not there eliciting it?

The first method, conversation about language or discourse fragments, in contrast, gave rise to an intuitionist approach. If it was possible to ask informants about their language, it was also possible to ask oneself about one’s own language. The topological of language and discourse in informant elicitation was part of a new kind of social interaction for native peoples, but it was a discursively mediated social interaction. Language had a public existence, a social life, that still anchored it, methodologically, in the goings-on of a discourse community. Intuitionism seemed to cut its ties with the interactional sphere, allowing an isolated researcher to reflect upon what is grammatical and what ungrammatical. No social interaction was required to investigate language. Method and theory, in other words, here coincided, giving credence to the reality of a “prelinguistic universal grammar” the child has prior to any social interaction.

Studies of feral children, such as The Wild Boy of Aveyron (Itard 1932; Lane 1976), “Caspar Hauser” (Singh and Zingg 1942:277–365), and others (Singh and Zingg 1942; Curtiss 1977), seem to provide no firm ground for deciding, one way or another, whether a language might spontaneously grow in the absence of the discourse community as a holding environment for universal grammar. Correspondingly, the special languages occasionally developed by twins may tell us more about intensive social interaction than about innate capabilities. We cannot finally decide about the biological versus sociological basis of universal grammar, even if we are sure that discourse communities, and not genes, are the holding environments for empirical languages.

At the same time, the method of intuitionism, as used to discover pre-experiential universal grammar, has a problematic relationship to public accessibility. It relies on normative judgments about grammaticality, whose correctness, however, is found in their social acceptance. While the test instances of discourse do not come from socially circulating discourse, but are instead thought up by the linguist in isolation—and for this reason have a cardboard feel: “the students want Bill to visit Paris,” “the students want that Bill visit Paris” (Chomsky 1984:16)—they and the judgments about them are subjected to social circulation as the basis for their claim to validity. Publicness, in other words, has been reintroduced at the level of persuasion, and the persuasiveness rests, ironically, on the seemingly nonempirical status of the medadiscursive judgments themselves. There is an echo of the window transparency assumed by social anthropology, and, in a different way, by an earlier American cultural anthropology, but here language as discourse is transparent to itself. Medadiscursive judgments—discourse—are unproblematically related to the discourse they judge.

From the point of view of recent research on discourse, this method
discursive ideology; as any fieldworker knows, one is too often training native speakers to give the response one wants or expects. But native speakers also resist; they are recalcitrant, supplying discourse in accord with principles that are in some measure independent. From this point of view, tape-recorded instances of socially circulating discourse exhibit an even greater recalcitrance, causing researcher and native speaker alike to reflect on the public life of language.

In calling for “A Discourse-Centered Approach to Language and Culture,” Sherzer’s (1987a) article stresses the need to make language research accountable to public discourse. If culture is localized in concrete, publicly occurring discourse, the same is true of languages, as part of the earth’s empirical diversity, as opposed to language as an innate capacity, a point Chomsky (1984:7) effectively concedes when he notes that “experience...serves to fix the parameters of [universal grammar], providing a core grammar.” This is not to flatten or compress languages or, for that matter, cultures, into the objective characteristics of sound or visual shapes, since discourse, as mentioned earlier, is only half objective. But it is important that it is half objective—like the proverbial glass. If sound or visual shape does not determine linguistic segmentation, neither can linguistic segmentation be arbitrarily imposed on that shape. The two exist in a state of tension, attracted to one another by the pressure to produce a perfect communication, a perfect form of publicness, and repelled by entropic forces, creativity, and subjective systematization.

It seems true that, for an instance of discourse to be interpreted, individuals require a presupposed sense of linguistic interconnections—of meanings as sense relations. Looked at through public discourse, however, the sense relations are individual and virtual, the degree of sharing within a discourse community becoming an investigable question. The projection of a language onto a community—a projection made by natives and anthropologists alike—is subject to reconfiguration with new instances, which are part of the public life of discourse. Some of the instances may languish as uninterpreted or misinterpreted or partially interpreted, but others may cause realignments within the sets of interconnections recognized by individuals and may correspondingly affect the character of future discourse within the community.

The notion of creativity, which Emmon Bach (1974:24) in his textbook on generative grammar glosses as “the ability to invent and understand novel utterances and to use them appropriately,” has been central to modern arguments about the character of language as a system. But the argument needs tempering through a study of the actual life of discourse within communities. An alternative point of view might stress discourse as

raises two questions. First, how do the object sentences, such as “the students want that Bill visit Paris,” relate to discourse that socially circulates outside the linguistic literature? To be sure, that literature itself gives those instances a public life, as well as a special context, but what is the relationship between that public life and broader public discourse? Chomsky (1984:7–8) notes that “it is hardly to be expected that what are called ‘languages’ or ‘dialects’ or even ‘idioms’ will conform precisely or perhaps even very closely to the systems determined by fixing the parameters of [universal grammar].” All the same, it is of interest that a micropublic (generative grammarians) has sprung up around agreements and disagreements about its own metadiscursive judgments, and this micropublic defines itself as embodying the judgments of ideal native speakers. Second, how can the linguists’ judgments about the sentences they think up be checked? If grammaticality judgments are metadiscourse, which can itself socially circulate, a natural question concerns the social motivations scholars have for accepting the judgments. Is it because the judgments correspond to their own untutored intuitions, as if the metadiscourse were transparent to the object discourse? Or does the metadiscourse have a rhetorical persuasiveness that is at least partially independent of the object sentences judged? Is the theory, to use the terms employed to criticize traditional grammar, descriptive or prescriptive?

This is not to discount the great contributions of Chomsky and generative grammar or the research currently underway. As in the case of the metadiscourse of cultural continuity, if there is bound to be some entropic slippage between metadiscourse and discourse, there is also bound to be pressure for the two to align. The question again concerns asymptotic limits. At the same time, the asymptotic limit may already have been reached or breached—how would we know?—and, in any case, the stakes are high; it is healthy to be circumspect. The claim for the method is that it can produce knowledge of innately human linguistic capabilities, but there is no confirmatory procedure built in, no bumping into empirical considerations that might make it more difficult for a rhetorically persuasive metadiscourse to take on the illusion of validity.

The method can be contrasted with the elicitation procedures, enumerated above, that were employed in earlier field linguistics and continue to be used by researchers today. Words, sentences, and texts are produced by native speakers who are not trained linguists sharing in the researcher’s metadiscourse. There is an encounter with publicness here, a check on the possibility that linguists might convince and perhaps even delude themselves about language in the absence of a struggle with the objective half of language. The procedure is itself a social interaction built around a meta-
traditional rather than novel. For example, using the genetic code as an analogy, a past instance might function as a template for replication. The replica would not necessarily be identical to the template—indeed, would rarely be so, if entropy were at work, even where speakers exerted themselves to produce faithful copies—but would involve low-level lexical and morphological substitutions. An individual might make use of a finite, albeit perhaps large, number of such templates, the relationships among which were themselves not perfectly systematized. The notion is similar to that of surface—as opposed to deep—grammar, which has been common in the literature, with the difference that in recent discourse-centered work there would be no assumption of a single shared set of such templates for the entire community.

From this point of view, novelty would take its chances against tradition. A new utterance—one not transparently a replica of some template stored in the discourse history of the community—might be incomprehensible or contextually inappropriate. Every new piece of discourse runs a chance of failure. But there is also a chance that it will succeed, that it will become a new fashion, a new template for the construction of other instances. Looked at from the point of view of tradition, innovation is not an argument for the rule-governed character of discourse, which makes it appear as if the element of chance had never been there. It is rather an argument for the lack of self-containment of the system, for the ever-present possibility that something new will emerge that might cause the system to reconfigure.

In spite of what Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1978:168) refers to as Stanley Fish’s “saturation bombing of stylistics”—a characterization that Fish (1980:247) himself adopts in subsequent ruminations on the subject—it does not seem especially dangerous to devote a portion (chapters 5–8) of the present book to the phenomenon of style or to deal in the remainder with the related problem of parallelism. After all, literary criticism and anthropology occupy different territories; a bombing in one need not be noted—except, perhaps, as interesting news—in the other. But the two territories share a common border, and some anthropologists have established squatter settlements in the literary area, just as a few migrants from the other side have drifted into this territory. There are also general regional trends that sweep across borders—the culture concept, for instance. Indeed, Fish’s standpoint, the interpretive community, sounds remarkably like the anthropological concept of culture. Especially because he draws inspiration from a primal dyad of interpretation and text, however, as opposed to the complex distinctions within the semiotic discourse area, it is important to note some architectural differences between his camp and that within linguistic anthropology, at least as mapped out here.

The anthropological approach to style (cf. Hymes 1974b; Urban 1985; Feld 1988) has to do with ways of speaking rather than of writing, as in the ritual wailing and ceremonial dialogue discussed in chapters 5–8. A style consists in a recognizable set of features, as in literary criticism, but the features are not only or even primarily or importantly the grammatical forms of Saussurean sense relations—not, in other words, the products of introspective (metadiscursive) reflections on meaning. They are instead such non-Saussurean forms as intonation contours, voice qualities, and participant role alternations—accessible to the senses, much the way the milk tree (as specimens of Diplorrhyncus condylocarpus) is. Knowing nothing of the language or culture, one can pick out of the soundscape an occurrence of Shokleng ceremonial dialogue. This is the palpable, objective life of discourse. But ceremonial dialogue also leads a subjective life, like the milk tree whose alter is mudji: it is also wãñëkëm, sensical in Saussurean terms, circulating socially independently of the objective form, and usable metadiscursively in ostensive reference (“that is wãñëkëm” [said while pointing to two men engaged in a performance of ceremonial dialogue]). Style is in this sense a discourse object; it is both sensible and intelligible, and it exists independently of a Saussurean textual interpretation. The notion is akin to that of musical style.

What is its relationship to style in literary stylistics? Most importantly, style there is a function of Saussurean meanings, not of sound properties, and it is typically a characteristic of a single text—an idiosyncrasy with respect to other texts that is internally regular in the text in question. In M. A. K. Halliday’s analysis of William Golding’s The Inheritors, discussed by Fish (1980:80–84), a key issue is the predominance of intransitive clauses in the first nine-tenths of the novel—“even such normally transitive verbs as grab occur intransitively” (Halliday 1971, cited in Fish 1980:81)—followed by a heightened transitivity in the final tenth. This is the formal stylistic pattern, and it is said to correlate with the subject matter: the story of two tribes, one of which (the “new people”) supplants the other. The correlation is that the fuller transitivity patterns reflect the “higher stage of development” of the supplanting tribe. Fish criticizes Halliday for attributing independent meanings to the grammatical patterns, when in fact the meanings have been derived from an interpretation of the text and then read back into the forms. This criticism subsequently
mushrooms into an all-out condemnation of literary stylistics: "my thesis is that formal patterns are themselves the products of interpretation and that therefore there is no such thing as a formal pattern, at least in the sense necessary for the practice of stylistics" (Fish 1980: 267).

If taken in its proper literary theoretical context, the argument is convincing, if not wholly irrefutable. If taken out of context, however—for example, if interpreted as meaning that all public sign vehicles have only the meaning that is given to them by interpretation, in other words, that interpretation is imposed on sign vehicles without in any way coming from them—the argument is debilitating. And it is too easy to hear in it an echo of the old culture-as-shared-meaning concept. Our squatters, dazzled by the sights in this foreign land, fail to notice that the buildings are adapted to a specific climate. What makes the argument successful across the border is the peculiar nature of the literary critical task: interpreting texts whose patent meanings are accessible to any normally literate reader. The interpretation must supplement the patent meanings, embed them within an encompassing understanding. This is a metadiscursive task within a discourse community that also already includes the discursive activity of reading. Fish's critique is convincing within literary land for this reason. His argument is that metadiscourse is not transparent to discourse—the same argument that was applied earlier to the problem of grammaticality judgments—and it is solid enough. The error is to extend it to discourse, and thereby to reproduce the Saussurean fallacy, namely, that, because the isolated utterance seems to have a meaning that is independent of it, there exists a realm of shared meanings independent of the objective life of discourse. When removed from its literary context, the thesis that "formal patterns are themselves the products of interpretation" can be read this way, but the conclusion is false: shared meanings presuppose public accessibility, which leads us back to the life and circulation of discourse.

The distinctiveness of the anthropological approach resides in its ability to play off two perspectives: the objective perspective of the researcher entering the community, for whom nothing (at least initially) is meaningful, and the subjective perspective of the native, for whom everything is. The two are denied to the literary critic, whose problematic is built up within a single discourse community. It is this playing off that allows anthropologists access to unconscious (associational, grounded in similarity and contiguity) as well as conscious (metadiscursive reflexional, grounded in sense relations) meanings; that allows us to hold in mind two equally unreachable goals: differentiating the presupposed whole to reach the infinitely rich part and building up from the parts to the complete and consistent whole; that allows us to view creativity as risky—subject to failure but also potentially transformative—rather than mechanical; and that allows us to grasp the simultaneously presupposed and emergent nature of culture.

To go back to the case of Halliday and The Inheritors, Fish is correct: the specific meaning Halliday attributes to fuller transitivity, namely, the "higher stage of development" of the supplanting tribe, can only be read back into the stylistic pattern from a broader understanding of the text. The discourse (Golding's The Inheritors) does not uniquely specify the metadiscourse (Halliday's Darwinian reading); literary critics are in no danger of being put out of work. But from this nonuniqueness proposition, one cannot conclude either that the metadiscourse is perfectly free with respect to the discourse. As in the Radcliffe-Brownian limit, if there is slippage between metadiscourse and discourse, there is also a pressure on the two to align. The transitivity issue, which is really a question of parallelism, as shown in the following chapters, may not be resolvable in terms of the unique meaning necessary for a specific reading of The Inheritors, but that does not mean that stylistic patterns do not constrain the class of possible readings. Persistent intransitivity may provide an inchoate feeling of some sort—a sense of lack of control by agents over patients, for instance—especially when contrasted syntagmatically with heightened transitivity. The feeling may be characterizable across distinct instances of discourse and may constrain, without determining, the acceptable range of metadiscourses. This is a matter for investigation. It cannot be resolved by fiat.

So while the dynamic duo of interpretation and text works in literary criticism, and may be a healthy corrective to transparent readings of the text, it cannot work for us in anthropology, if we are to maintain the problematic of public accessibility. Saturation bombing is just too indiscriminate. In the rubble we find not only the target, but also the remains of collapsed distinctions, which are, alas, our only fortification against a naïveté emboldened by rhetorical flourish. We want to maintain that interpretation is not just one undifferentiated activity, for anthropologists or for natives; that there are more and less consciously accessible interpretations; that metadiscourses are publicly accessible in their own right and have to be held accountable in some measure to their object discourses; and that there is therefore some measure of public constraint that serves to set limits on the centrifugality of subjective meaning, which, if unconstrained, would, finally, represent a denial of culture as socially shared or transmitted altogether. Fish is right to guard against a crude scientism, but we do
not want either to wander off into a land of chicanery and illusion. Anthropology should instead be the site of an encounter between objectivity and subjectivity, between unconscious and conscious meanings, between discourse and metadiscourse, between sensibility and intelligibility, an encounter that is, after all, the life force of discourse and of culture.

CHAPTER 2

Grammatical Parallelism and Thought

In *The Savage Mind* (1966), Lévi-Strauss uses the phrase “logic of the concrete” to characterize thought operating in the sensuous realm of animals, plants, physical space, time, taste, and smell, realizing itself through the structured organizations of worldly experience. Concrete logic contrasts with the abstract thought that is presumed to be characteristic of the West. The type case for the latter is propositional logic or formal axiomatic theory, characterized by symbolically encoded propositions, organized in deductive fashion with a set of privileged propositions and relations of inference or entailment. At least insofar as the dominant values of modern western European and American culture are concerned, Lévi-Strauss is right: scientific rationality and deductive reasoning are valued over and above concrete logic and mythological thought, although the latter may be the most pervasive in society at large, the former but a “thin veneer” covering the teeming reality of contemporary public life.

Between sensuous concreteness and deductively organized abstraction, however, lies the realm of discourse, and it is to discourse that one can turn to understand thought as it is displayed in the public life of culture. Discourse is simultaneously concrete, residing in actually occurring instances, and abstract, dependent upon networks of interconnection for its interpretation. In fact, when Lévi-Strauss subsequently traces the structures of concrete thought, he follows them into myth and hence into the realm of discourse; but, as discussed earlier, he looks through myth—understood as a collection of sign vehicles in its own right—to the concrete world that it seems to encode. Myths are treated not as discourse but rather as structures of experience, characterized by binary oppositions (such as high:low, nature:culture, raw:cooked). Important as this analysis is, it takes no account of the organization of the way actually occurring discourse publicly embodies collective “thought.”
sciousness and vice versa, in which similarity in one area goes along with
diversity in another, in which metadiscursive awareness of mutual under-
standing covers over misunderstandings, often the product of discourse
entropy—part of the broader entropy of the universe—and in which, fi-
nally, discourse configures and reconfigures, producing the shifting visage
of culture, an ephemeral sand painting that can be drawn and redrawn,
but also easily dispersed by the winds of time.

Notes

1. An Approach to Culture and Language

1. The term “discourse-centered approach” took shape through discussions at
the University of Texas at Austin, especially among Joel Sherzer, Steve Feld,
Anthony Woodbury, Richard Bauman, and myself. Joel Sherzer may have coined
the term and was, in any case, the first to use it in print as the title of a work (Sher-
zer 1987b).
2. From an interaction among children observed while walking down a Chi-
cago street in the late 1970s.
3. An alternative approach in which emotion is the subject of ethnographi-
cally studiable metadiscourses about emotion—the intellectual culturalization of
affect—is the theme of Rosaldo’s (1980) study of the Ilongot of the Philippines and
Lutz’s (1988) of the Micronesian Ifaluk.
4. Chomsky (1984:19) notes that this example “is not idiomatic English, but
[that] we may assume this to be an accidental gap reflecting properties that are not
part of core grammar.”
5. This subject has evoked much interest in linguistic anthropology, thanks to
the work ofJakobson (1960, 1966, 1968), Hymes (1981), and Tedlock (1983), each
in different ways; see also Fox (1977, 1988), Sherzer (1982), and Woodbury (1985).

2. Grammatical Parallelism and Thought

1. For the linguistic concepts of “agent” and “patient,” see Fillmore (1968).
For an alternative structural account of agency and passivity in narrative, see Bre-
mond (1973).
2. It is possible for a myth in theory to be “dual-centered” or “multicentered,”
that is, to have two or more centers, which consecutively dominate it. It is useful to
distinguish such consecutive domination from situations in which two or more per-
sonages or entities vie for the center in a given stretch of discourse.
3. At the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 1980.
4. Phonemic representation in Shokleng, as in Kaingang (Wiesemann 1972 and